

Earthquake-damaged Towns and Villages under Authoritarian Regimes

Reconstruction and Preservation Practices in Panciu and Soveja (1940–45)

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ABSTRACT

The earthquake of the November 10th 1940 was the first major earthquake in Romania recorded since the beginning of the 20th century that massively impacted the capital city, Bucharest, and settlements in the Moldova region. The year of 1940 was marked not only by natural disasters, but various events shaped the Romanian political landscape and its territorial integrity following the Vienna Diktat on August 31st. In September 1940, Marshall Ion Antonescu became the de facto leader of the country, which led to the installment of the military dictatorship (1940-45). The damage caused by the earthquake of November 1940 prompted Antonescu to address the issue of urban and rural reconstruction of the damaged settlements. Panciu, a small town located in the vineyard region of Vrancea in Moldova, where the epicenter of the earthquake was located, was one of the most damaged settlements. Informed by archival research, this paper analyzes the planning and preservation processes that eventually led to the reconstruction of Panciu and of the surrounding village Soveja. This paper problematizes Panciu's reconstruction envisioned by the military dictatorship reflecting its role as national symbol and a strong nationalist antisemitic ideology. Particular attention will be given to the proposal for the reconstruction of Romanian traditional houses in Panciu and to the preservation of historic monuments in the surrounding rural area of Soveja.

Introduction

The earthquake of 7.7 magnitude was considered the first major earthquake impacting Romania and Southeastern Europe in the first half of the 20th century.¹ It caused major damages to cities such as Bucharest and Iași, and in territories that had been acquired in 1918, such as Bessarabia and Bukovina. Numerous private and public buildings were damaged or destroyed, along with entire towns and villages. One was the small town of Panciu and its surroundings, in the Vrancea region, where the epicenter of the earthquake was located. This event and the beginning of World War II, which brought Romania along Nazi Germany and the Axis powers in October 1940, triggered a massive rethinking on how cities and villages should be reconstructed and modernized in a safe manner. Following the foundation of the modern nation-state in 1918, modernization stood under the strong nationally infused idea of the creation of a Romanian Christian identity of the urban and rural space. If until this time, comprehensive systematization measures were considered relevant for the modernization of cities and spas towns, following the installation of the military leadership under Marshall Ion Antonescu (1940–45), the systematization of the rural areas and regional counties, became of particular interest for the state politics and urban policies.²

This paper aims to highlight the implications of the 1940 earthquake on the debates surrounding reconstruction and preservation of the smaller towns. By examining the case studies of the severely affected areas like Panciu and its neighboring communities, including the village of Soveja, this paper explores how authoritarian regimes like Antonescu's addressed natural disasters, reconstruction, and preservation within the broader context of ongoing war. Firstly, this paper will provide an overview of the damages sustained in Panciu and Soveja from the November 1940 earthquake. Then, the impact of the event on normative discourses, including legislation and policy, as well as on the experts-led decisions on reconstruction and preservation measures, will be

introduced. Based on the proposed case studies, the paper will address issues such as the reconstruction and preservation of *traditional* houses and religious monuments in the context of authoritarian governance, specifically examining the fascist military regime. This analysis is informed by archival research conducted at the National Archives in Bucharest and Chişinău, as well as at the Monuments Preservation Institute (*Institutul National al Patrimoniului*) in Bucharest. Contemporary publications such as *Urbanism (Urbanismul)*, *Architecture (Arhitectura)*, *the Bulletin of the Commission for Historic Monuments (Buletinul Comisiunii Monumentelor Istorice)*, and *the Yearbook of the Commission for Historic Monuments (Anuarul Comisiunii Monumentelor Istorice)* are also analyzed.

The Impact of the November 1940 Earthquake on the Small Town of Panciu and the Village of Soveja

Before the earthquake, the town of Panciu had 366 buildings, 350 of which were private and of which 16 were public buildings.³ Approximately 220 of these were damaged during the earthquake, 120 totally destroyed, and only 8 buildings remained undamaged. Some constructions were built in brick and stone (87). Those built in clay and stock (around 125), primarily located in peripheral areas, seemed to have better resisted the earthquake. The general consensus was to demolish most of the heavily damaged buildings, except those where owners requested a temporary delay. The most severely damaged buildings (around 80) in the city center were demolished by August 1943, and another 30 were planned for demolition.⁴ Among the demolished buildings was the old cathedral, while Sf. Paraschiva, a small wooden church, was dismantled and its reconstruction planned to start in November 1943.⁵ In Panciu, the plan was to construct 368 new houses starting in 1943, in addition to public buildings concentrated in the civic center. By 1946 the reconstruction had to be completed.

The population prior to the earthquake consisted of Romanians, Jews, and Armenians. The Jewish community, members of which owned around 71 houses in Panciu, mostly inhabited the central area. In the aftermath of the disaster, they had to be relocated, as the area was designated for the construction of the new civic center.⁶ The Jewish community was to a great extent displaced to the surrounding areas (the cities of Focşani, Odobeşti, and Bucha-

rest), largely dispossessed, and denied the right to return to their hometown.

The earthquake had a significant impact on neighboring communities as well. The monastic complex Brazi, a protected historic monument located in the hills of Panciu, suffered severe damage, and it was proposed for reconstruction. In the small thermal village of Soveja, located approximately 40 kilometers from Panciu, 382 families were affected by the earthquake and fire in November 1940. It was recommended the reconstruction of 368 houses in the village. Additionally, the village church, a classified historic monument, was severely damaged and its restoration proposed. Due to the lack of experts in the Regional Technical Service, the responsibility for the reconstruction plan of Soveja, was assigned to the Reconstruction Service of Panciu.

Legislative Responses to Natural Disasters at the Beginning of the 20th Century

Following Law 729 of August 15 1941⁷, the General Direction for Reconstruction, initially established after the First World War, was reinstated under the Ministry for Public Works and Communication. Its primary task was to supervise repair works in regions damaged by war and earthquake, particularly those affected by the 1940 earthquake (Article 1). Its responsibilities included the creation of systematization plans for damaged settlements, developing projects for public administrative buildings and for rural housing, overseeing the construction of state-funded public buildings, managing surveying works by local administrations, conducting technical competitions for rural housing to be constructed by local communities, and nevertheless managing the storage of construction materials (Article 2). Also, a provisory Office for the Evaluation and Centralization of the Earthquake Damages for public buildings was proposed (Article 10). In addition, a series of provisional instructions were issued to prevent the deterioration of constructions due to earthquakes and to repair damaged buildings.⁸ Technical instructions were provided regarding materials and construction techniques for public and private buildings in both urban and rural areas. According to these provisions, the Romanian territory was divided into two high seismic areas: the region southeast of the Carpathian mountains (from Vrancea to Kronstadt-Braşov) was identified as the most vulnerable to earthquakes, while the rest of the country was considered to be at minimal risk.

A law was specifically enacted for the reconstruction of Panciu as a flagship project of the Antonescu regime, owing to the significant damage it sustained (Law No. 244 published in the Official Monitory Nr. 59 from March 10, 1942).⁹ Its reconstruction was ordered by Antonescu, as a modern town with an exclusive “Romanian-Christian identity, by excluding any Jewish element” (Article 1). Romanian-Christian meant Orthodox Christian. This nationalist approach was expressed in 1941 through various norms concerning the construction of public buildings. For example, it was argued the need to construct “typical Romanian public buildings” that would serve as a guide in urban planning and as examples for private buildings, which were expected to adopt a national style considered more suitable than the perceived “Jewish” character of Romanian cities.¹⁰ Article 13 emphasized that the historic environment and local specificities of Panciu and its surroundings should be considered when planning the streets layout and the design of squares. The proposed law also outlined the conditions, materials, and responsible authorities for its reconstruction. The reconstruction was based on the systematization plan issued by the *General Direction for Reconstruction*, under the *Ministry for Public Works*, and in agreement with the observations provided by the *Superior Commission for Systematization, Development and Beautification of the Cities* within the *Inner Affairs Ministry* (Article 3). Until 1945 private properties had to be reconstructed by private individuals or by the *Ministry for Public Works* (Article 10). Great attention was given to the expropriation and nationalization of properties by the state (Articles 4, 5, 6, and 7). It’s important to note that, according to the Law of October 5, 1940, Jews were expropriated for the benefit of the state. In contrast to the Jewish community, the Romanians who were expropriated, were entitled to receive allotments of the same size and of equal value as the ones subjected to expropriation by the state (Article 6 of Law 244 from 1942). The House for Constructions (1930–1949), an institution with the headquarters in Bucharest and founded with the purpose to construct housing for public employees in a selected number of major cities, could supervise and provide support for any type of housing requested by the private individuals also in Panciu. However, due to the war conditions and material scarcity, new rules were issued in 1943 (Law 105, published in Official Monitory Nr. 46 from April 24, 1943). Repairs and constructions could only be carried out with the approval of *Ministry of Army and War Production*.¹¹

The unification of Transylvania, Bessarabia and Bukovina in 1918 not only had implications for the normative frameworks governing new constructions in the process of modernization of the urban and rural spaces, but also for those pertaining to the preservation of historic monuments. The Monuments Protection law was first issued in 1892, revised in 1913 and 1919. The latter was in use until the end of World War II and it focused mostly on religious, archaeological, and medieval historic monuments. Following the Royal Decree Nr. 1719 from July 1915, all churches and monasteries built before 1834 were automatically declared monuments until the general inventory of historic monuments was finalized.¹² Despite the lack of changes to the law of 1919 during the war, several amendments have been made in the systematization law, which considered the integration of monuments preservation in various measures of urban planning. Systematization decisions had to be taken in agreement with the members of the Commission for Historic Monuments. However, as a reaction to the restorations of historic monuments carried out by the French architect Lecomte du Noüy (1842–1923) at the turn of the 20th century in Romania, who significantly changed their appearance, the main guiding restoration principles set by the law from 1919 were still in place. These principles focused on retaining all original elements and allowing substitution only with similar elements for parts that would endanger the monument.¹³

Experts’ Approach to the Reconstruction, Preservation, and Modernization of Romanian Cities and Villages following the 1940 Earthquake

Surprisingly, even though numerous historic monuments were affected by the earthquake, the publication dedicated to monuments preservation, *The Bulletin of the Commission for Historic Monuments*, remained silent between 1940–1945 on the matter of damaged historic monuments either by the earthquake or by the ongoing war. The journal, issued by the *Commission for Historic Monuments*, which was founded in 1860, ceased its activity in 1948 and was reestablished in 1951 as the *Scientific Commission of Museums and Historic Monuments* (1951–1959), primarily served to promote studies and research on sites of cultural interest, and to raise awareness about historic monuments, mostly religious, and archeological sites in Romania. *The Yearbook of the Commission for Historic Monuments* was issued yearly starting in 1942, after a

break of 27 years, by the *Commission for Historic Monuments* with the purpose of complementing the information provided by the Bulletin. It published meeting protocols, reports from the regional sections of the *Commission for Historic Monuments*, technical reports, lists of monuments included and excluded from the heritage lists, and eventually, reports on selected historical monuments affected by earthquake or war that would receive funding to support consolidation works. It also reported on measures to integrate historic monuments into the proposed systematization plans.

But the commission's silence notwithstanding, several Romanian experts did weigh in on the question of how to deal with damages caused by the earthquake in the context of discussions about the systematization of urban and rural settlements initiated in the 1930s. Publications such as *Urbanismul* and *Arhitectura*, which concentrated on urban planning trends, policies, and projects, as well as architectural developments in Romania and internationally, took up the issue of earthquake damages and proposed solutions for safe building and post-disaster reconstruction.

Prominent experts addressing the impact of the earthquake were architects and engineers who had also contributed to the theorization of interwar systematization politics in Romania. Up until 1940, the publication *Urbanismul* had focused on various issues related to the modernization and systematization of the Romanian cities and regional counties. However, the discourse on natural disasters gained prominence following the earthquake of 1940. Cincinat Sfințescu (1887–1955), an internationally trained construction engineer and professor at the Architecture School in Bucharest, who also held a leading position at the office responsible for the systematization of the Romanian cities in Bucharest, contributed significantly to theoretical approaches to urban planning and the systematization of the urban and rural spaces in Romania.¹⁴

Reconstruction in Sfințescu's theoretical approaches published in *Urbanismul*, didn't imply retaining previous details and the technique of execution unaltered, but only the general appearance of the execution. He argued against the reconstruction of failed projects, suggesting instead that inappropriate projects should be adapted. In his view improvements and adaptation were considered mandatory. Using the example of earthquake-damaged buildings, Sfințescu contended that reconstructing them

following the same principles and materials, that proved unsafe in earthquake conditions, would be a fatal mistake. Similarly, the reconstruction of unhygienic, unsustainable, and unaesthetic buildings was deemed inappropriate.¹⁵ For Sfințescu, reconstruction meant avoiding the repetition of past mistakes, whether technical, aesthetic, economic, or hygienic. As an alternative, he proposed the concept of "transformation" (*prefacerea*) of damaged buildings. This approach went beyond mere reconstruction (*refacerea*), involving changes to fundamental structures and potentially altering the function and use of the building. According to Sfințescu, transformation was applicable rather to Romanian urban and rural areas. He proposed a selected number of damaged cities to serve as experimental areas, eventually to be implemented in other parts of the country.¹⁶

Sfințescu provided an analysis of potential factors which led to extensive damages caused by the 1940 earthquake, highlighting such factors as material failure, inadequate foundation resistance, and planning errors. He pointed out the stability of buildings constructed with reinforced concrete, wood, timber-frames, Rabitz plaster, with foundations in reinforced concrete (notably, the only building in Panciu that survived the earthquake without damages had such a foundation).¹⁷ Furthermore, he argued that ornaments on the buildings' façade caused problems, prompting a discussion of style revision in the future. His main conclusion was to refrain from reconstructing as it was, and to adhere to modern urban planning principles and regulations.¹⁸ Other authors, like Aurel Beleş (1891–1976), discussed soil quality, and the physical impact of the earthquake on various construction typologies, including high-rise buildings in Bucharest.¹⁹ Duiliu Marcu (1885–1966), another prominent engineer from the interwar period, emphasized the use of reinforced concrete for increased building stability.²⁰

The impact of the earthquake on historic religious monuments and Orthodox churches was discussed in the journal *Arhitectura*.²¹ It highlighted how natural disasters had historically influenced the choice of construction materials, styles, and shapes of religious buildings. In this context, Antonescu advocated the positive effect of using reinforced concrete for the consolidation of brick buildings, which proved resistant during the 1940 earthquake.²² The use of new materials triggered discussions about developing a new type of religious building, which would correspond to the requirements of the

time for a wider space and growing parishes. New developments in the form of cathedrals appeared more appealing. Additionally, the use of wooden churches, widespread in the Romanian landscape, was considered rather a matter of the past due to their limited size.²³ Yet one needs to mention that religious buildings held particular relevance for the Commission for Historic Monuments. The attribution of the Commission, in addition to providing technical support for restoration and conservation of religious projects, was also the protection of new religious buildings. In 1903 a new architectural office took its works along the *House of the Church*, whose primary responsibility was to care for historic religious buildings and provide plans, technical, and artistic studies for planned new churches.²⁴

Planned Reconstruction of Panciu and Preservation of Traditional Housing and Historic Monuments

Within the *General Directorate for Reconstructions*, two commissions were established with the responsibilities of coordinating the reconstruction efforts for Panciu and developing plans for property distribution.²⁵ These commissions included Architect Radu Culcer, the adjunct director of the *General Directorate for Reconstructions*, along with members from various ministries: Public Works, Finance,

Justice, Ministry of Inner Affairs and the Cadastral Office. However, no public competition was held for the project, and the primary responsibility for reconstruction was assigned to the Ministry of Public Works.²⁶ For this purpose, extensive documentation and studies were undertaken, including systematization plans for the affected town and surrounding villages, reconstruction plans for each individual building, and photographic documentation.²⁷

The systematization plan for Panciu proposed by Radu Culcer was approved in March 1942 by the *Superior Commission for the Systematization Plans, Beautification and Development of the Cities*. The plan aimed to reflect the priorities of the regime, emphasizing a modern centralized administration. Five distinct zones within the town were identified. Zone 1 would contain the civic center, zone 2 the commercial area, zone 3 public buildings, and zone 4 the industrial area. In zone 5, a separate plot for housing was designed. Three types of traditional houses – small, medium, and large – constructions in wood and bricks, were proposed. (Fig. 1) This typology was developed within a larger proposal for the reconstruction of earthquake or war-damaged housing, which had to reflect traditional Romanian elements. For example, three types of peasant houses were proposed, adapted to geographic conditions, such as housing in the mountains, hills, or plain areas. These had to be built using materials typically found in the region (wood, brick, stone, adobe), with roofs made of tiles, wood, or reed. They were categorized into three sizes – small, medium, and large – each comprising 1–3 rooms, not higher than 2.5 meters. Approximately 21 proposals were studied, yet all had to retain traditional architectural elements for Romanian housing, including a front porch, a vestibule with a fireplace, and a storage room.²⁸ Ornaments and decorations were deemed non-essential for financial reasons, and so it was left to individual owners to manage this aspect. The argument was made that retaining the old forms of rural housing was economically unviable. Also, the need for further exploration of different types of *traditional* rural housing was emphasized.²⁹ The regional typology of housing in the so-called traditional *Vrancean style* was proposed for Panciu and Soveja.

The dominant element to be integrated into the newly planned civic centers of Panciu and the surrounding villages was the Orthodox church. (Fig. 2) This reflected the policy of Romanization, which meant a process of enhancing Romanian Christian

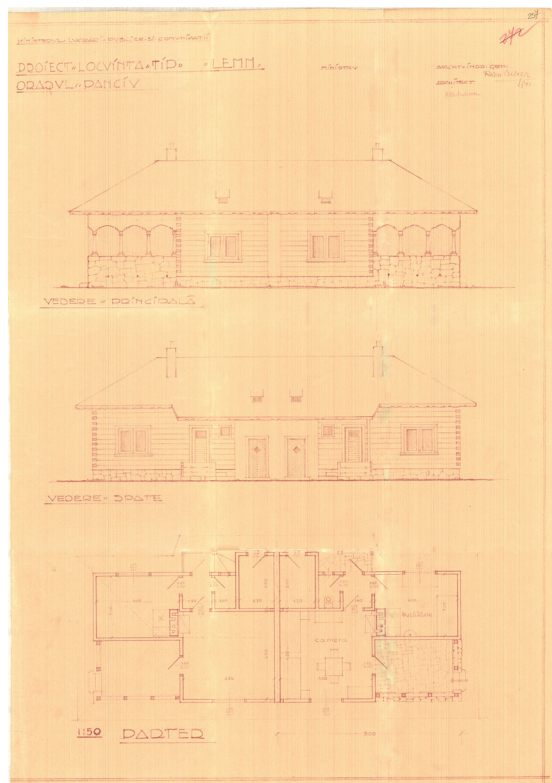


Fig. 1: Model Traditional House in Wood Panciu

Orthodox values and traditions through institutional and administrative structures, as well as in public spaces. In Panciu, the new Orthodox cathedral was planned as part of the new civic center, along with administrative buildings. Constructed in reinforced concrete it was designed to accommodate up to 400 people. It had to reflect the architectural style of the region, the so-called *Moldovan style*, characterized by vaulted ceilings and arches executed in reinforced concrete. Its position in the square had to respect the canonic orientation of its main and side façades.³⁰ Its main façade was expected to be built in stone and bricks, in accordance with the regional style. (Fig. 3)

Meanwhile, other religious monuments in the earthquake-affected region underwent various treatments. An example is the monastic complex Brazi, near Panciu, built in 1653. It underwent significant transformations in 1826–27, and the church of the monastic complex was reconstructed in 1834 and repaired in 1890, again in 1914, and throughout the 1930s. The church was designated as a historic monument in 1928, following numerous letters from the abbot, who aimed at saving the complex from destruction. Due to the extent of destruction caused by the 1940 earthquake,³¹ a proposal was made to reconstruct 10 monks' cells, a dining hall, chapel, and belltower to maintain its function.³² Despite conducted studies and financial reports on restoration and reconstruction works, by September 1943 the restoration works had not taken place, and a decision was made to demolish the monks' cells and preserve only the chapel. The Commission for Historic Monuments cited a lack of funding as the reason. In 1946, a new proposal was made to carry out reconstruction and restoration works in several stages, but in 1947, it was instead decided that the severely damaged parts of the monks' cells to be removed and to secure provisionally the church.

Reconstruction and Monuments' Preservation in Soveja

The reconstruction process of the village of Soveja was closely tied to the developments in Panciu. A systematization plan for the village was proposed, that outlined changes to the layout of narrow secondary streets, and that called for aligning allotments perpendicular to the main road.³³ A civic center, including the main administrative building, festivities hall, police station, public bath, and a public school, was also proposed.³⁴ By August 1943, the plans for the reconstruction of public buildings had already been reali-



Fig. 2: Panciu Civic Centre with the Orthodox Cathedral Plan

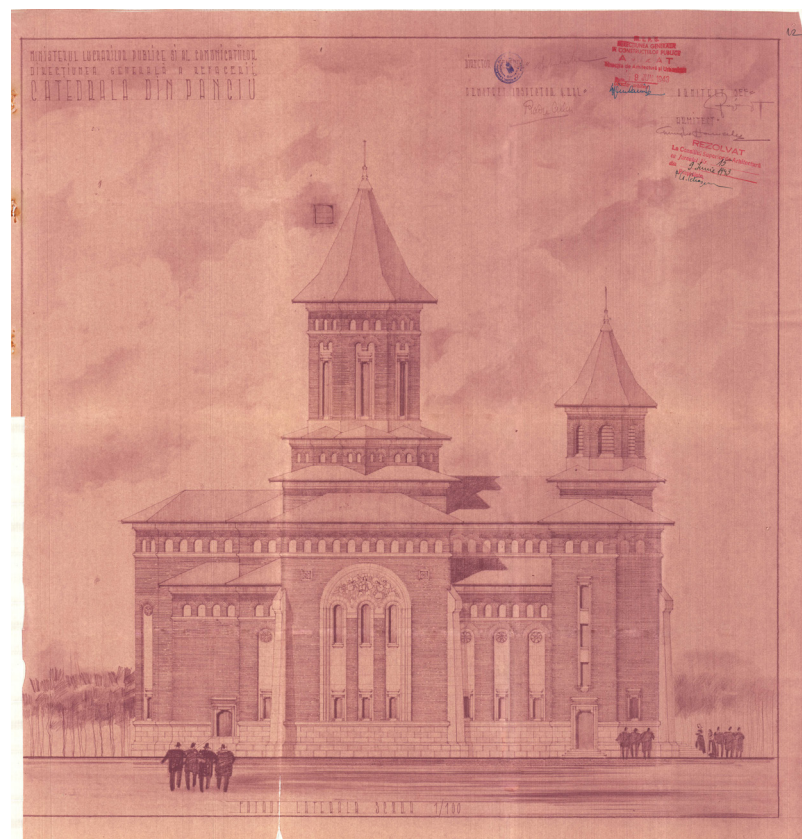


Fig. 3: Orthodox Cathedral Plan Panciu

zed.³⁵ Due to limited financial support and technical capacities, similar to Panciu, a limited number of three types of housing specific to the Vrancea region were proposed for reconstruction.³⁶ Inhabitants had no choice but to accept the new regulations and assigned building types. The reconstruction materials were sourced from the local pine and beechwood in the surrounding forests. Public buildings and a few private houses received tiled roofs.

In addition to the reconstruction of housing and public buildings in the village, restoration works were also considered. A significant restoration project approved by the *Commission for Historic Monuments* was the Soveja monastery, a historic monument dating back to 1645 that had been damaged several times by previous earthquakes.³⁷ The restoration of the monastery's church was approved in 1943,³⁸ and it was repaired with financial support from the community and the *Committee for the Reconstruction of Soveja*. (Fig. 4) The renewal of

the iconostasis was proposed, requiring approval from the *Directorate for Historic Monuments* within the *Ministry for Education and Religion*, which was sought in October 1943.³⁹ The execution of the restoration plans was assigned to the architect Vasile Moisescu and eventually approved by the *Commission for Historic Monuments*.⁴⁰ Significant restoration works were done on the stone floor of the church, the iconostasis, and the monastery's surrounding walls.⁴¹

Conclusions

The paper discussed the impact of the first major earthquake in Romania in November 1940 on the built environment in the Vrancea region. By focusing on two case studies, this paper highlighted that decision-making and expert-led debates reflected priorities established by the national program of urban planning, modernization and preservation of urban and rural spaces implemented by the authoritarian regime of Antonescu. By discussing the case study of the reconstruction of Panciu and the village of Soveja, this paper revealed two major issues generated by the earthquake of 1940. Namely, this event created the opportunity for the fascist military regime of Antonescu to capitalize on and advance the nationalist agenda through a major reconstruction project carried out in Romania during the Second World War. The reconstruction of Panciu had to embody the Romanian Christian national identity and become a model of reconstruction at the time, which was inscribed in the contemporary antisemitic discourse. This translated not only in measures to eliminate elements of Jewish urban presence in Panciu, but also by promoting and contributing to the discourse of modern planning and preservation of traditional architecture. Secondly, the earthquake triggered further the debates on how the built environment in Romania had to modernize in safe manner and at the same time preserve the national, regional, specific and traditional elements. These had to be reflected by the proposed traditional housing reconstruction and the presence of the Orthodox church as a key element in the planning of the future Romanian cities and villages. However, restoration projects of traditional places of worship received different treatment. As demonstrated by the monastery complex in Soveja, the restoration project was carried out to a great extent with the support of the local community, while budget constraints limited restoration works on the monastic complex in Brazi and prioritized new church constructions, such as the Orthodox Cathedral in Panciu.

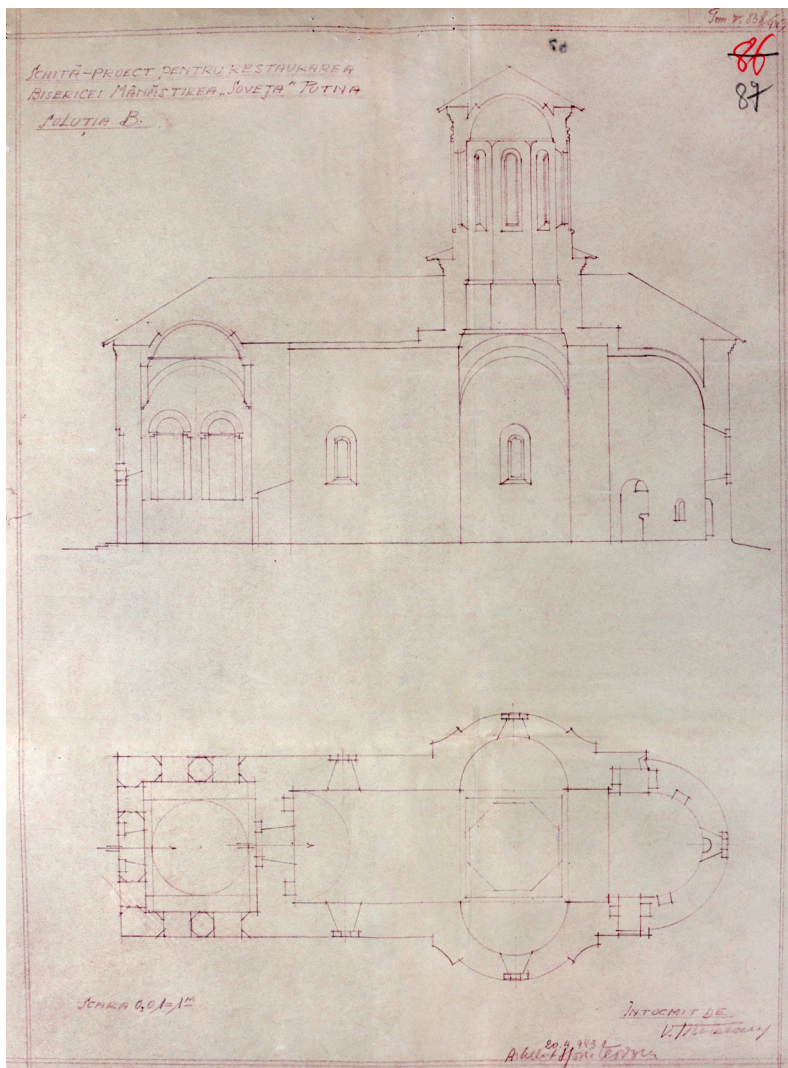


Fig. 4: Restoration Plan Monastery Soveja (Proposal B)

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